DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 306 666 EA 020 912

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TITLE Playing PACman: Principal Assessment Centres as an Addictive Innovation.
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 30p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Effectiveness; *Administrator Evaluation; *Assessment Centers (Personnel); Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; *Job Performance; Personnel Evaluation; *Principals; *School Administration
IDENTIFIERS *Ontario; *Principal Assessment Centers

ABSTRACT

This paper considers the nature of the Principal Assessment Center (PAC) innovation, discusses probable reasons for its popularity, and offers a few reflections on some implications of the success of this innovation. The first section considers the origin and nature of principal assessment centers and describes the model used by the Educational Leadership Center. The second section explores some of the possible reasons for the popularity of PACs. In the third and final section, the implications of sponsoring an innovation that may be "addictive" are considered. Appended is a table on skill dimensions considered in the PAC and 22 references. (Author/SI)

Playing PACman: Principal Assessment Centres as an addictive innovation.

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Order of authors' names determined by the toss of a coin.

Running head: PRINCIPAL ASSESSMENT CENTRES

Playing PACman: Principal Assessment Centres[1] as an addictive innovation

The OISE/UWO Educational Leadership Centre [ELC] was created in May, 1984 as a cooperative venture between the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education [OISE]. The previous OISE Western Ontario Field Centre was "folded-in" to the new organization with Dr. R.H. Stinson, former Head of the OISE Western Ontario Centre, becoming the first Director of the ELC. When it first began operations, the work of the ELC revolved around a number of specific programs and commitments inherited from its parent organizations: from OISE the centre assumed responsibility for the service activities formerly undertaken by the Western Ontario field centre; from the UWO Faculty of Education, the centre inherited responsibility for the joint sponsorship of the OPSTF Leadership Academy and Leadership Course, the OAEAO Superintendents' Internship Program, and an on-line search service which the Faculty had been providing for field organizations.

Since then, the activities of the centre have evolved in conformity with its general mandate to provide a field-referenced base for the study and development of educational leadership, with particular reference to the principalship. The on-line search service has been phased out and a variety of new research and development activities have been initiated. Thus, in addition to providing field services to area boards, current activities include a major research project investigating the behaviour of

effective secondary school principals, a study of principal decision-making strategies and the delivery of Ministry of Education Principal Certification courses, as well as a variety of developmental workshops. The most significant development, however, has been the provision of a principal assessment centre [PAC] service for school boards. As discussed in greater detail below, this innovation has been well received by participating boards, with the result that the centre is now devoting a substantial portion of its resources to this activity. Indeed, by some tokens, the work of the centre has come to be dominated by assessment centre operations.

This paper considers the nature of the PAC innovation, discusses probable reasons for its popularity and offers a few reflections on some implications of the success of this innovation. The first section considers the origin and nature of principal assessment centres and describes the model used by the ELC. The second section explores some of the possible reasons for the popularity of PACs. In the third and final section we reflect on some of the implications of sponsoring an innovation that may be "addictive."

Principal Assessment Centres

The problem

The notion of principal assessment suggests the use of some formal means of appraising the degree to which individuals are suited for the principalship, which in turn implies the development and application of tests of administrative ability. Both the term itself and the logic of the idea imply that such tests could be used to both select prospective

principals and evaluate the performance of incumbents. This is not normally the case, however, for different techniques are usually used for pre-appointment assessments and post-appointment performance appraisals, and the methods used for either one of these situations do not normally meet the needs and circumstances of the other. Thus at the outset a distinction needs to be made between principal assessment and performance appraisal. As the term will be used here, principal assessment is concerned with estimating the degree to which individuals will perform well if they are appointed as principals, the manifest purpose of the process being to help screen and select those who aspire to the principalship.

Typically boards appoint principals on the recommendation of selection committees, which in turn take cognizance of the overall record of candidates, the way in which they perform in an interview situation, and the judgement of senior administrators. Obviously selection committees and the boards themselves are interested in making the best appointments possible, but less obviously they may have very little useful information on which to base their final decisions. By definition all candidates will possess the formally required credentials for appointment but, while the processes by which these qualifications were obtained can be thought of as an initial assessment of the suitability of the candidates, their common possession of these credentials provides little basis for distinguishing between them. This is particularly so when formal qualifying credentials are awarded on an ungraded basis, as is the case with the Ontario Principal's Certificate. The amount and nature of any additional academic or professional preparation undertaken by candidates allows for some

differentiation, but the quality and relevance of such work is not always apparent. Similar problems exist in judging the experiential qualifications of candidates.

The other sources of information typically available to selection committees also suffer from limitations, and may at times be quite unreliable. As discussed by Griffiths, Goldman & MacFarland (1965), "GASing" [getting attention of superiors], can be an important factor in selection decisions, but, while in some cases GASing may reflect administrative potential, in others it may not. Similarly, recommendations made by senior administrators can be influenced by a host of contingent, personalistic and reputational factors that may over or underestimate the suitabilities of candidates. On this point Fallinger (1981) has shown that teachers and vice-principals who strongly aspire to the principalship tend to exhibit greater deference to their superordinates than those who do not hold such ambitions, a factor which could well bias reports and recommendations prepared by principals and superintendents. But even when such recommendations are prepared with meticulous care and accuracy, they may still be discounted during the selection process because of imagined bias or political factors. Finally, of course, there is the acid test of the interview, but this too is a notoriously unreliable selection technique (Arvey & Campion, 1982).

In short, standard approaches to the selection of principals often require decision makers to assess the suitability of candidates on the basis of limited and potentially unreliable information. This is generally so even when selection committees or boards attempt to introduce greater

precision through the adoption of clearly specified selection criteria. Such tactics can certainly simplify the process, particularly if stringent academic or experiential qualifications are specified, but this may not necessarily be helpful. On the other hand, attempts to apply competency referenced criteria may do very little to improve either the accuracy or the efficiency of the selection process. A decision to select principals on the basis of, for example, leadership skills and problem solving ability may help a selection committee to know what it is looking for, but in the absence of some reliable means for ascertaining whether or not candidates possess such competencies, the committee would still be unable to make informed and accurate choices, even if it believed that it was doing so. The situation would be radically improved, of course, if an independent objective test of these and other administrative competencies were available. Armed with the results of such a test, the committee would be able to make direct comparisons between the administrative potential of candidates and thus make far more informed and potentially accurate decisions. Principal assessment centres purport to provide such a test.

The idea

Although Principal Assessment Centres are relatively new, especially in Canada, the generic idea is well established. In essence, an assessment centre is a sequence of exercises designed to simulate a particular job and generate large amounts of raw data related to pre-determined competencies. Candidates perform the exercises under the scrutiny of trained assessors. Each candidate's performance is scored in a standardized way and then later discussed by the assessors, who then prepare a detailed report on the

performance of each candidate for presentation to the employer and the candidate concerned. In the case of PACs, the exercises are intended to simulate aspects of the principalship and the candidates are normally individuals who are seeking appointments as principals.

Assessment centre techniques originated in the late 1930's, when German military psychologists developed a system of multiple evaluations to help select officers. The British army added a leaderless group discussion to the original model, and the American Office of Strategic Services added "situational exercises" or simulation exercises (Huck, 1973, p.192). Michigan Bell was the first business organization to open a selection oriented assessment centre in 1958. Hundreds of similar assessment centres are now operated by or for businesses and government agencies throughout the United States, and it has been estimated that 10,000 employees are assessed for administrative potential every year in the United States by Bell companies alone (Huck, 1973, p.193). Properly designed and operated assessment centres have even been ruled to constitute a legally valid means of personnel selection by the United States Supreme Court (Cutchin and Alonso, 1986, p. 88).

The Third International Congress on the Assessment Center Method established certain minimum standards which serve to further clarify the essential elements of a reputable assessment centre:

i) it must use multiple assessment techniques;

ii) it must use trained assessors;

iii) judgements resulting in evaluations must be made at a time other than during the observations;

iv) assessors must reach their evaluations at a time other than during the observations;

v) simulations of job situations must be used;

vi) the techniques used must have been designed to evaluate previously determined skills. (Cutchin and Alonso, 1986 p. 89),

One of the main attractions of the process is that it normally yields comparative evaluations of candidates, which is exactly the kind of information which is normally not available to selection committees. On this point an internal evaluation of the custom designed PAC used by the Dade County school system in Florida concluded that the main weakness of the model, which was otherwise found to be extremely satisfactory, was that it provided pass/fail results rather than comparative ratings (Gomez, 1985 p.48). Consequently, while the results originally produced by this PAC served to reduce the size of the candidate pool considered by selection committees, they were of little assistance in helping committees to discriminate between candidates. The comparative ratings of candidate performance which are normally produced by most other assessment centres, however, address precisely this problem.

The technique depends heavily on the expertise of the assessors. In most PACs, assessors are superintendents and senior principals. In some instances, particularly in the very large school systems which operate their own assessment centres, the assessors hold administrative positions within the same system as the candidates. Some of these models also draw on wider management and administrative expertise. The model run by the

Houston Independent School District (Hughes, Murphy and Wong, 1986 p. 21), for example, uses assessors from IBM and Tenneco, as well as professors from the University of Houston and county and regional education department administrators. In Stockton, California, where assessment centres are used in the selection of all administrators from the level of vice-principal and above, assessors from outside the educational sector are involved in assessing candidates for superintendencies, but not for principalships (Joines and Hayes, 1986 p. 22). More commonly, independent agencies contract to provide PAC service for a number of school boards, and under such circumstances assessors will be drawn from participating systems in such a way as to ensure that candidates are not assessed by administrators from their own system.

Some assessment centre models are quite short; the Dade County model has candidates completing three exercises in one day. Other models are much longer, and may involve a wide variety of assessment methods. The Management Development Program run by the University of Tulsa, for example, uses one in-basket exercise, two interviews, two leaderless group discussions, one oral presentation and a battery of paper and pencil tests, including the California Psychological Inventory, the Hogan Personality Inventory and the Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory (Ehinger and Guier, 1985, p.5). The more exercises there are to be completed, the more time is required and the more expensive the procedure becomes. Some PACs take this into account and vary the length of the model according to specific needs and available resources. The Stockton model, for example, has a total of seven exercises but may use as few as three in any particular centre, thus

reducing the participant time from two days to one (Joines and Hayes, 1986 p.22).

The NASSP model

The ELC uses the PAC promoted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP]. This model was developed for NASSP in the mid 1970's (Moses, 1977) and is now used to assess principal candidates at more than 25 sites in the United States (Ogawa, 1986). All agencies operating this model are required to use only the materials and procedures prescribed by NASSP, and all assessors must also be trained directly by NASSP. These restrictions are intended to ensure and demonstrate the maintenance of high and comparable standards across all franchises, such standardization being of particular concern in the notoriously litigious culture of the United States. Yet while this insistence on standardization undoubtedly enhances the perceived objectivity of the comparative ratings yielded by the model, it also limits the flexibility of the process.

Some larger school systems in the United States operate their own NASSP assessment centres, but in most cases boards contract for NASSP assessment services from a university or other agency which holds a NASSP franchise, which is the case with the ELC. Participating Ontario (and other Canadian) boards enter into an agreement with the ELC under which the board provides an agreed number of assessors during a year, and has a matching number of candidates assessed during that year. Boards then nominate principals and system administrators to be trained as assessors. Training is undertaken in a four-day "hands-on" session staffed by certificated NASSP trainers who explain the model and processes used and

train the nominees to use the standardized observation protocols and scoring procedures.

To date, over a hundred Canadians have received NASSP assessor training through the ELC. An examination of ELC records showed that while a few of these assessors have worked at only one PAC, some have participated in as many as five, with the average being three. The majority of these assessors are male (86%); slightly more are superintendents (48%) rather than principals, but some (16%) are neither, this group being composed of ELC staff, professors and educational officials not employed by school boards. Among the principals, half head secondary and half elementary schools while 21% of the assessors come from separate school boards.

Participating school systems select the candidates they wish to have assessed, and these candidates are then scheduled to attend one of the eight PACs currently operated by the ELC each year. Each PAC follows exactly the same pattern. Twelve candidates are observed by twelve assessors during two days of group and individual simulation exercises. There are six data-generation activities in all, two group simulations, two in-basket simulations, one individual fact-finding exercise and a personal interview. The model used in London is called a six-on-six model, whereby the twelve assessors are divided into two groups of six and the twelve candidates are similarly divided, with one group of assessors being responsible for one group of candidates throughout the process. At the end of the two days, the candidates leave, but the assessors spend the remainder of the week discussing the performance of candidates and drafting

the very detailed final report which is prepared for each candidate.

The first stage of this process is the completion of exercise report forms for each participant. This involves scoring and classifying the written responses produced by the candidates during the in-basket exercises, and categorizing and appraising the verbatim records and detailed observational data gathered by the assessors throughout the first phase. When all of these standardized report forms are complete, the assessors join together for a "consensus group" discussion of how each candidate performed on the twelve skill dimensions listed in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Each candidate is considered in turn, with the scores allocated for each data point on the report forms being discussed by the assessor group until consensus is reached. When the entire matrix of evidence is constructed, the assessors then must reach consensus on a global rating of each candidate's suitability for the position of principal or vice-principal, depending on whether the candidate is currently a vice-principal or a teacher.

Data generated during the assessment procedures are strictly confidential. Every individual who is assessed receives a detailed report which provides an analysis of his or her strengths and needs for improvement, and suggests developmental activities. A personal conference with one of the ELC officers or a designate is scheduled for each candidate, during which the final report is carefully reviewed and

discussed. Each candidate is provided with a copy of his or her final report; one copy is kept on file in the ELC and a third copy is given to the employing board. Final reports are considered to be valid for five years, after which they are destroyed.

Between November 1985 and December 1988, a total of 289 candidates participated in 25 PACs operated by the ELC. Of these, 30% were women and 58% were working in elementary schools. Slightly more of the female participants had an elementary background (73% as opposed to 51% of the males). Most of the candidates were vice-principals (81%), although some (10%) were in teaching positions, with the remainder holding various other posts, such as consultant or administrative assistant. Of the total number of participants, 81% came from public boards and 19% from separate boards.

The ELC has been unable to satisfy the demand for PAC services. Many of the participating boards wish to have more candidates assessed than current strictures allow, and other boards would like to join the current consortium. In an attempt to meet the demand, two satellite sites, one in eastern Ontario and one in the maritimes, will begin offering NASSP assessment centres under the general supervision of the ELC during 1989. Plans are also afoot to open a third satellite in Ontario in the near future, and there is a possibility of another satellite site being established in British Columbia to meet the needs of a west coast board that has been sending candidates and assessors to London, at great expense, for some time. On the basis of demand, then, the success of the PAC innovation appears indisputable. Why should this be?

Assessing the attractions of PACs

Validity

One logical reason for the popularity of PACs could be that they deliver what they promise: they provide accurate tests of administrative ability that enable selection committees to better choose between candidates for the principalship. This claim, however, is not easily substantiated. Although there has been much research on the validity and reliability of assessment centres in the business world, the findings are by no means conclusive. Many studies report positive correlations between success in assessment centres and later job success, but it is evident that assessment ratings may often lead to, rather then merely predict, future promotions (Huck, 1976; Klimoski & Strickland, 1977; Howard, 1974). In Howard's terms, the "crown prince(ss)" effect of doing well in an assessment centre, or the "kiss of death" of doing badly, may by itself ensure that assessment results are frequently self-fulfilling prophecies (p.128-9). On the other hand, the classic Management Progress Study from which the original Michigan Bell assessment centres were developed, yielded impressive results after controlling for the criterion contamination problem (Bray and Grant, 1966). Yet despite the signal results of this study, there is no compelling reason to alter the conclusion reached by Howard (1974): "the research, though positive, is sparse, comes from too few sources, covers too many variations in components, lacks replication, and is usually plagued by methodological problems such as criterion contamination" (p.127).

Even so, this is too generous an appraisal of the research dealing

with principal assessment centres, for there have been remarkably few studies of the reliability and validity of the models in use, and the results that are available are not encouraging. A detailed longitudinal study of the NASSP model found a high level of inter-assessor agreement on candidate ratings and concluded that the exercises test what they purport to test and these skills are indeed required in the principalship (Schmitt, 1980; Schmitt, Noe, Meritt, Fitzgerald & Jorgensen, n.d.). But while these findings support the content validity of the model (at least in the United States context), this study was unable to demonstrate predictive validity. On the contrary, only weak correlations were obtained between assessment centre ratings of candidates, and independent ratings of the organizational climate in the schools subsequently administered by those promoted to the principalship, leading the researchers to conclude that these PAC ratings were "generally not related to overall school functioning as perceived by students, teachers, or support staff" (Schmitt, Noe, Meritt, & Fitzgerald, 1984, p. 211).

Other benefits

The current lack of evidence to support the predictive validity of the PAC introduced into Canada by the ELC does not, of course, necessarily negate the usefulness of the model, for future studies may produce more positive results. Yet even if such results are not forthcoming, the unique data produced by the process could alone explain the popularity of PACs. On the surface, the final reports of candidates appear as the main "product" being purchased by boards that contract for PAC services. Considerable care is taken in the production of these reports to ensure

that they present a full and accurate account of the ratings and conclusions reached by the assessors, and that they do so in clear, jargon-free and professional prose. Apart from ensuring that the final reports "look good," this attention to detail also ensures that the results are communicated as completely as possible. These results deal explicitly and in detail with how well candidates appeared to perform on each of the t. e skill dimensions listed above, each of which has obvious face validity to the administrative process. Moreover, these results represent t consensus judgement of six experienced educational administrators who are not employed by the board concerned. All of these factors suggest that the final reports that are the formal product of PACs will likely have utility to boards and their senior administrators regardless of whether the process has been found to be scientifically valid or not.

The force of this point is increased if PAC reports are generally treated as a source of useful additional information on administrative candidates, rather than as the basis for the final selection of principals. Boards are, of course, free to use final reports as they see fit and do not necessarily have to base their promotion decisions on these data, or even take stock of the final reports in their selection procedures. It appears that while some boards in the United States promote only candidates that receive high PAC ratings (Schmitt, et al., n.d., p. 20), others use PAC reports primarily as part of their initial screening procedures (Miklos, 1988, p. 58). From the information currently available to us, it would seem that the boards in the ELC consortium incline toward the latter policy. Certainly none of the Canadian boards base their selection of

principals solely on the final reports, with most, if not all, viewing the PAC results as simply additional factors to be considered in the overall screening and selection process.

More importantly, the ELC boards also appear to place greater weight on the developmental rather than the selective aspects of PACs. Indeed, from discussions with superintendents and directors it appears that the development benefits of PACs are seen as more important than the enhancement of principal selection procedures. In reflecting on his system's involvement, for example, Ronald Fraser (1988), the Deputy Director of the Carleton Board of Education, explained that "at no time during these early years did we wish to use the data results as a part of our selection process for positions of responsibility...the idea was to clearly enable the individuals to acquire another measure to assist them in developing a professional plan." Moreover, he further observed that "the greatest single benefit that appears to come from the program is to the individual who participates and who gains in his/her professional growth."

This view, which has been supported in conversations with senior administrators in other participating boards, recognizes the developmental value of both the PAC experience itself and the contents and recommendations in the final report. In the first instance, participation in PACs is recognized as a valuable formative experience for candidates and a developmental and networking activity for assessors. In the second, senior administrators perceive that the final reports offer prospective principals a valuable diagnostic and developmental assessment of their strengths and weaknesses which they can then use to better prepare

themselves for consideration for promotion. Obviously, the assessment reports received by the boards may also be used by senior administrators to counsel PAC "graduates," and may also be formally considered at some stage in the screening and selection process. Even so, this perspective, which seems to characterize the expectations of senior administrators in many of the participating boards, views PACs primarily as a means of enhancing the human resources of the school system, rather than the principal selection process per se.

Participant satisfaction

Comments obtained from candidates and assessors involved in the ELC PACs provide strong support for both the presence and importance of these developmental benefits. Analysis of the exit evaluations obtained from the first 213 ELC candidates (Nagy and Allison, 1988) found that most were extremely positive. Very few candidates made negative comments about the process, although there were a markedly greater proportion of negative statements specifically mentioning the decidedly American content and context of the exercises, and the preponderance of secondary school situations in the materials, weaknesses that are currently being addressed by ELC staff. In the third year of operation, the ELC also conducted a survey of past participants to see whether they retained a positive view of the process after they had gained some temporal distance. For some respondents, this distance was as great as two years; for others, only a few months. Most of the responses to the relevant open-ended question consisted of simple, positive, statements. "The value of the experience increases with time and reflection," wrote one past participant; "It was a

very worthwhile intensive experience," wrote another; and "It was one of the most beneficial professional growth experiences I have ever had," declared yet another.

Further to this point, one of the indirect benefits of PACs is that they draw together twelve candidates from different parts of the province, and in some instances the country. Most have similar backgrounds, common aspirations, and all, of course, are enduring a common trial. For the duration of the centre, participants are housed and fed together, and have plenty of free time in which to establish relationships and discuss professional problems. This has proved to be a valuable opportunity which is frequently identified by participants as a peripheral benefit.

A few respondents condemned both the process and its results, but nearly all of those surveyed retrospectively also declared themselves satisfied with the outcome of the process. Typical comments were that the results of the assessment had given candidates confidence in themselves and their abilities, and that the PAC exercises had enhanced their understanding of the principalship. Others described the experience as a catalyst which made them look more critically at themselves: "I found the assessment a betrayal of myself. However, it shook me out of my complacency and provided me with the impetus to make some changes," declared one respondent. Many past candidates specifically commented on being especially impressed with the accuracy and depth of the assessment reports and the feedback they received. For many, the great value of the final report, echoing Mr. Fraser's comments above, is that it formed the basis for a personalized professional development plan. A final relevant

point here is that more than a few past candidates declared that they would like to see their boards placing more emphasis on the assessment results when making promotions and appointments.

The assessors also appear to regard the PAC process as being both valuable and personally satisfying. Most of the assessors who responded to the Nagy and Allison (1988) survey declared that being trained and serving as an assessor was itself an outstanding professional growth experience. More specifically, these assessors typically reported that the experience sharpened their observation and listening competencies, improved their interpersonal skills and broadened their professional perspective and outlook. Although there is very little leisure time for assessors, they do have opportunities to talk with one another, and these "networking" activities were frequently identified as a particularly valuable aspect of PACs. As far as the process itself is concerned, assessors often describe PACs as being "demanding", "gruelling" and "exhausting;" but at the same time they also typically declare the experience to be "motivating", "invigorating", "stimulating" and "enriching."

The total package

The points made above lead us to conclude that the main factors underlying the popularity of the PACs sponsored by the ELC are associated more with the total package than the formal product. The "test results" contained in the final reports are not unimportant and may well be considered when making appointment and promotion decisions, but for many senior administrators these reports appear to have more of a formative than a summative function. As such the particular value of the final

reports is that they offer each candidate both an opportunity to reflect on her or his strengths and weaknesses, and suggestions for future development. Moreover, this assessment is provided by "expert outsiders," rather than possibly biased superordinates, and it is derived from the application of a standardized, behaviourally anchored process that considers competencies which have "obvious" relevance to the principalship. These benefits in themselves could make PACs very attractive to boards, but the total package offered by the ELC also has other attractions. The experiential benefits gained by candidates is one obvious benefit, as is the networking and change of pace benefits for the assessors. The training received by the assessors can also appear as an additional benefit, especially as the enhancement of supervisory and observational skills which some assessors attribute to the process may also assist in the performance of their in-system duties. Last, but certainly not least, boards are able to acquire these and other implied benefits by purchasing a single, "off-the-shelf," neatly "bundled," reputationally solid, contract package from the ELC.

Some reflections

There are many vantage points from which to consider the ELC's experience with principal assessment centres and the possible effects which this innovation may have on the ELC, its parent organizations and participating boards. Our decision to reflect on PACs as possibly "addictive" innovations is meant to be neither frivolous nor derogatory. Other administrative and educational ideas and practices could be thought of as displaying addictive effects. Many educators and policy makers

certainly seemed addicted to the spirit of progressivism several decades ago, just as many administrators now seem addicted to "excellence." Indeed, public schooling itself could be thought of as a socially addictive innovation. Moreover, the basic notion does not automatically imply that addictive practices are necessarily sinful or the results debilitating. The habitual consumption of tea or coffee or a devotion to playing video games, for example, will likely bring little serious harm to the addicts concerned, assuming, of course, that such things do not become all-consuming dependencies.

Organizations are not human, but they may display a devotion to selected activities which is akin to addiction. The analogy between addiction and the PAC innovation goes further than giving rise to an amusing title. Addictions typically begin with the attraction of a novelty and they continue because the addict has easy access to the addictive substance or activity and continues to enjoy the euphoric state it bestows. By its very nature, an innovation is a novelty; the PAC innovation was attractive in the first instance because it was different, new, unusual and somewhat glamourous. Those participating in PACs, as shown above, generally leave the experience with an almost euphoric feeling, and virtually everyone involved is satisfied that the process is beneficial. The boards in the consortium have easy access to the PAC: a single three-year contract provides the service and, although it is expensive, it is a relatively small proportion of the operating budget overall and provides multiple benefits which would probably be equally expensive if provided in any other way. At this point in the introduction of an innovation by a

change agent classical change theory would require that the change agent gradually divest itself of the innovation and hand it over to the parties who have found it to be of benefit to them. But in the case of PACs, this is difficult because it is the `outsideness' of the process which is so valuable, especially to small boards. The creation of satellite centres operated by smaller consortia of boards with their own staff, whose function is to run PACs and nothing else, is probably the only way that the ELC, as change agent, can divest itself of this successful innovation. Unfortunately, in so doing, the ELC will lose the benefits which accrue from running PACs, and herein lies another addictive property of the practice.

Any field service organization needs good access to the field. The close relationships based on professional respect and trust, which develop during the time spent in PACs, is invaluable. Not only are strong personal contacts established, but the opportunity exists to explore development and research needs as perceived by the people "in the trenches", and to discuss with them ways to meet these needs. A glance through the list of boards served by ELC developmental activities will confirm that many of them are also involved in the PAC consortium. Such access is enviable, but at what cost?

Like all addictions, playing "PACman" has its negative effects. The time devoted by office and research staff to preparing, running and concluding each PAC is not inconsiderable; in the case of research staff, the irony is that this time demand diminishes the time available to them to pursue the insights and contacts gained as a result of being involved in

PACs. A minor, but potentially deleterious, consequence of this time pressure might be the tendency to become more and more dependent on other "off the shelf, pre-packaged" answers to requests for services, since the time available for careful customizing is much diminished.

Another, less tangible, disadvantage of the success of the PAC innovation has been an erosion of identity. For many boards, and indeed to a large extent for the parent institutions, the ELC is synonymous with its PACs. The ELC does perform useful work in a number of other ways, including extensive developmental and research work in the field, but for many the PAC profile is so strong that it overshadows all else.

A more serious disadvantage to be expected from an organizational addiction is that the people who populate the organization may develop habitual ways of working and thinking which effectively commit the organization to a limited and restricted set of activities and responses. Stereotypical folk-conceptions of bureaucrats and bureaucracies are obvious examples. This would be serious enough if only the ELC were involved, but in this case school boards across the province are also potentially becoming dependent on the PAC process. By the very nature of the standardization of its structures and the intensity of the shared experience, continued participation in NASSP PACs may well tend to promote a single way of thinking about and doing educational administration. Moreover, this standardized conception of school administration is gradually being introduced into this province without the scrutiny or sanction of the provincial authorities or the province's leading theorists in educational administration. In this sense, perhaps the name of the game

is not PACman but Trojan Horse.

Conclusion

Educational innovations come and go. Many generate initial enthusiasm, but few are ever fully integrated into the routines and cultures of the adopting organizations. Principal assessment centres may well follow many other initially popular new ideas into oblivion, but this is not likely to happen in the near future, for interest in PACs is still gathering momentum in the United States and has only just begun to grow in Canada. The manifest benefit of improving screening and selection procedures will probably interest many boards, while the additional developmental benefits that can be realized make well packaged and integrated models, such as the NASSP centres, very attractive. Thus, even though the predictive validity of any particular model may remain suspect, assessment centres could well have a bright future, and the ELC may be playing PACman for a long time to come. There would seem to be strong arguments to be made, therefore, for the development of alternative models, especially, perhaps, models which explicitly emphasise the developmental elements of assessment technology which appear so attractive to the boards currently involved in the ELC consortium. Indeed, in some ways the popularity of the PAC innovation among Ontario boards may be more a reflection of the limited professional development opportunities for administrators and prospective administrators than a consequence of its declared purpose. If so, then there may be much to be gained by all parties from a serious dialogue about the human resource development needs of boards.

TABLE 1

Skill dimensions considered in the

NASSP Principal Assessment Centres

Administrative skills	
	Problem Analysis
	Judgment
	Organizational Ability
	Decisiveness
Interpersonal skills	
	Leadership
	Sensitivity
	Stress Tolerance
Communication skills	
	Oral Communication
	Written Communication
Personal characteristics	
	Range of Interests
	Personal Motivation
	Educational Values

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1. The authors cling tenaciously to the Canadian spelling of `centre' throughout this paper, although, in the interests of accuracy, `center' will be used wherever a direct quotation from another author or a specific title used this spelling originally. Thus, both spellings will be found in the paper, depending upon context.